

Commandant's Remarks

Founder's Day 2006

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, friends of West Point, future members of the Class of 2010, good evening. It is an honor to be here.

My objective tonight is to provide you a short update on your Military Academy and more importantly, to tell you about our product: our 4100 cadets and our graduates serving our Nation around the globe.

As you know, I came to West Point as the Commandant directly from a tour in Iraq. That experience reinforces two guiding observations as I execute my duties as the Commandant.

First, combat-effective Soldiers, leaders and units must have an absolute focus on, and proficiency in, the fundamentals of our profession. This is a simple truth that is made clear in the crucible of combat. As a result, my constant messages to the Corps are “prepare for combat – we are an Army at war,” “focus on the fundamentals,” and “know and enforce high standards.”

Prepare for Combat; we are an Army at war. This resonates with each cadet and permeates every aspect of their experience at West Point. When the Cadet Adjutant states from the poop deck, “Please give your attention to the First Captain”, cadets know what is likely to follow. The names are familiar – those of old beast squad leaders and table commandants, lab partners, or teammates - killed in action.

They know them as lost comrades-in-arms. Young leaders like 1LT Laura Walker, Class of 2003, captain of the women's team handball team, and our first woman graduate killed in combat. She was an engineer officer in the 864th Combat Engineer Battalion (Heavy) serving in Afghanistan when she was struck down by an IED during ground assault convoy operations.

Laura had already served a tour in Iraq and had just a short stint stateside before heading to Afghanistan. Her Task Force Commander, LTC Paul Paolozzi, told us Laura was the best platoon leader in the battalion.

Or 1LT Derek Hines, was killed in Baylough, Afghanistan during a combat operation to seize a suspected enemy site. Derek was the captain of our hockey team. At 5 foot 8, he wasn't one of our biggest guys, but he was unstoppable. His battalion commander, LTC Mark Stammer, called from Afghanistan to ensure that I knew of Derek's bravery under fire, not only on this occasion, but throughout his tour in combat.

Today, Derek's initials and an American flag are emblazoned in the ice in our hockey rink.

The bravery and sacrifice of Laura and Derek reinforce my second observation: our graduates, particularly the recent grads, the lieutenants and captains, are demonstrating great competence and courage and serving magnificently in a tough fight. I can assure you that our graduates are all that we have hoped they would be and they are building upon the proud legacy of the Long Gray Line.

As you know, our young graduates are not the only ones fighting the battles in the Global War On Terror. They are also the iron majors in battalions and brigades, and the battalion and brigade commanders. And 34% of the Army's 2/3/4-star general officers are graduates!

I note this to simply reinforce that USMA graduates continue to serve our nation selflessly at all levels of responsibility. The Long Gray Line continues to answer the Nation's call.

Our graduates, and our Army, are deployed today, fighting a tough, adaptable enemy, motivated by religious and cultural beliefs which are hard to understand, and they are dealing with complex social and economic issues. To succeed, we need leaders who are smart, tough, confident, and creative.

West Point's world-class academic program is the primary means of developing creative and adaptive leaders. We have been continually refining the curriculum to respond to the requirements of a changing world and to the lessons learned from the War on Terror. Our academic program still consists of 30 core courses, balanced between hard sciences and humanities, and 10 to 14 additional courses for an academic major, and I assure you - it remains very challenging. In fact, I'm certain that it is more challenging than what I experienced in the late 70's or observed as a TAC in the mid 80's.

US News and World Report consistently ranks our engineering programs among the best in the nation – they ranked our civil engineering program 2nd in the nation and our mechanical engineering program 5th – and cadets still win more than their fair share of prestigious post-graduate scholarships. This year, we already have one Rhodes, four Truman, two Gates, two Fulbright, three East-West, and two Marshall scholars; and we have two more cadets in the final running for a Fulbright Scholarship. These scholarships are a triple-win scenario. Certainly, the cadet wins, but the Army and the Academy also benefit. These scholars, on average, remain on active duty longer than their peers and they mature into some of our finest strategic thinkers.

Also, our cadet academic teams regularly bring home the gold. Yes, my wingman, the Dean, BG Pat Finnegan, has competitive teams, too! This year, the West Point Model United Nations team won all five of the premier North American conferences (which no university has ever done before), and also won its fourth consecutive World Championship at the Harvard World Conference in Beijing, China, besting 167 universities from 37 nations. On the science side, the West Point Concrete Canoe team took 5th place at the national championships – I don't know why we do this, but we are good at it.

My piece of the core curriculum is Military Science instruction. As you should know, MS is being taught during the academic year again. Our military science courses prepare cadets for the tasks they will perform in the upcoming summer training and capture their lessons learned at the end of summer training. We are focused on fundamental Soldier-Leader tasks and tactics. We recently changed Military Science for First Class cadets to make our NCOs, who are all successful platoon sergeants, their MS instructor for the final semester at West Point. We've also included discussions with junior leaders, (captains, lieutenants and NCOs), fresh from the battlefield. I'll tell you, these leader panels and video-teleconferences with officers in the field are powerful. We work hard to keep military science relevant, and I know it is paying off when cadets write back and tell you about it. 2LT Emily Perez, Class of 2005, recently wrote to her MS instructor:

“Overall, I think I’m a lot more prepared than I originally thought, but I still have a lot to learn. I’ve told everyone I know that’s still a cadet to pay attention to the MS classes. The reality is that what DMI is teaching is what we will be doing as platoon leaders.”

Even though her comments were just what we like to hear, we aren't resting. We are all committed to constantly examining and improving our programs to ensure our cadets are educated, trained and inspired to lead Soldiers when they are commissioned.

The sequence of Cadet Summer Training – Cadet Basic Training (CBT), Cadet Field Training (CFT), a West Point Detail as a cadre member and a stint with an active Army unit - remains the defining leadership experience for cadets. And I must point out, that over 80% of the USCC faculty, and 50% of USMA faculty, have recent experience in Iraq or Afghanistan and they bring that experience to teaching, training, and mentoring cadets at every opportunity.

I believe our military development program is physically and mentally tougher, and more connected to the Army, than it has ever been. For example, we are working hard to ensure cadets are more comfortable with weapons and we are stressing the fundamental Soldier/leader skills. Last year, we made CBT and CFT a weapons-immersion environment, in which cadets kept their weapons with them round the clock. This teaches them familiarity and comfort with the weapon and simulates the environment they will find when they deploy. This year, we're establishing Camp Buckner as a Forward Operating Base, which is what they will experience in the basic leadership course after graduation and the way our Army is deployed in the field today.

We are also modifying our capstone exercise, Operation Highland Warrior (OHW). We have taken lessons learned from the field to make OHW more relevant and seamless to cadets. They will focus on six different missions: convoy reaction drills, cordon and search missions, search and attack missions, access control point, live-fire ambush, and quick reaction force.

Arabic speakers are integrated into the training scenarios – a mix of Department of Foreign Languages instructors, contracted native speakers, and some cadets who are majoring in Arabic – and are dressed in appropriate clothing. This will lend a greater sense of realism to the training, as our cadets will literally have to work through translators to communicate with the “locals” and will not be able to understand their conversations.

These are only a few of many modifications, but I think they give you an idea of how much we strive to keep CBT and CFT current and relevant; and develop cadets who are adaptable.

The fight we're in also requires physical and mental toughness, and West Point has one of the best physical education programs in the nation. Cadets still box and swim...and still earn high zeroes on the trampoline, and they know the familiar “no, no, no” of the Physical Education instructor when the push-ups don't meet the standard. They take two Army Physical Fitness

Tests per year, running the obligatory three times past the sewage treatment plant, and run the Indoor Obstacle Course every year in the dusty air in Hayes Gym.

We've been talking about the new Arvin Cadet Physical Development Center for five years now, and I am proud to report that all 495,000 square feet are now open and functioning, including a fully-renovated Class of '62 Room, and it is a world-class facility. The cadets swarm the building every chance they get and make full use of the state-of-the art fitness equipment and facilities. As you may know, it also boasts a 48-foot high indoor rock climbing facility donated by the Class of '79, and an indoor pool with a wave generator. Cadets were thrilled with these additions – until they realized that DPE owned them!

DPE has incorporated the climbing wall in the plebe military movement course and the plebes are already telling the upperclass how easy their plebe swimming classes were before the new wave pool was opened. The bob & travel takes on new meaning when you add 2 and 1/2 foot waves, some smoke, darkness and rain, and the first 10 minutes of "Saving Private Ryan" blasting through the surround-sound system.

As I noted, we have the best core physical education program in the nation and the world's best faculty to run it. That said, we continue to improve the Physical Program.

The cornerstone of our physical development program remains athletic competition. Every cadet is an athlete. They play on their company intramural teams - including contact sports like rugby, football, and boxing - or on one of 27 competitive club teams or one of 25 Corps Squad intercollegiate teams.

I want to point out that our competitive club teams are excellent and they continue to beat Navy and Air Force over 80% of the time. Let me list just a few of the West Point competitive club teams that have earned national rankings:

Sport Parachute: our cadets dominated the 2005 National Collegiate Parachuting Championships in December, winning 36 of 75 medals and outpacing their nearest competitor, the Air Force Academy, by 15 medals. Greg Hastings, '06, is the overall US National Collegiate Champion. After four jumps, Greg's total deviation was 5 centimeters!

Boxing: USMA has two national champions in cadets Ovidiu Iacob, '08, and Reggie Smith, '07, and the team took the bronze medal from the National Collegiate Boxing Championships, held in Reno, Nevada, on April 8.

Men's Rugby: 11-0 record, ranked first in the nation this year and beat #6 Navy, 30-22, in November. Five cadets were selected for the Combined Services team to compete in the National All-Star Championships and Andy Locke, '07, made All-American honorable mention.

Orienteering: 2005 junior varsity and varsity team national champions. Sara Klaben, '06, placed 1st in the nation in women's varsity and earned one of three spots on the US team at World Orienteering Championship in Switzerland.

Women's Team Handball: took their fourth consecutive national title at the Collegiate National Championship for Women's Team Handball, held April 21-23 at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Pistol: In addition to the team winning the national championship, Maxwell Pappas, '06, took honors as the Top Individual in the competition, and the team can also boast three other All-Americans.

Fencing: The men, who were defending their 2005 national title, dominated the U.S. Association of Collegiate Fencing Clubs' National Championships, April 1-2, at Clemson University. The épée squad took fourth, the saber squad took second, and the foil squad took first, which enabled the men's team to repeat as national champions. The women placed third

overall, with the épée squad earning 10th and the saber squad earning sixth. The women's foil team defended its national championship and was once again crowned national champs. Emily Hannenberg, '07, is the 2006 National Intercollegiate Women's foil champion.

Our corps squad teams also continue to succeed on the fields of friendly strife. This past spring, Army reclaimed the Patriot League's President's Cup for the first time since '97; and Army had its first series win over Navy (17-14-1) since 1977-78.

We also celebrated a banner fall sport season in 2005 – it was our first winning autumn in nearly ten years. Women's volleyball delivered American University its first-ever Patriot League loss, downed Navy 3-0, and finished 2nd in the league. Women's soccer finished 2nd in the League, going to the Championships for the first time since '97. Men's and women's cross country teams both swept Navy, and also finished 2nd in the League.

Of course, our flagship sport is football, and although we did not beat Navy, the program is on the road back to a winning tradition under Coach Bobby Ross. Four of the 11 teams we played last season went on to bowl games, and three of them were ranked in the top 25 throughout the season. Some tough games, but we have made tremendous improvements. 20 to zip against Akron was our first shut-out since '93, and our first shut-out on the road since '68. We beat Air Force for the first time in 8 years, and the first time on their turf since I was a Firstie – in 1977. And winning four in a row – that's something to be proud of.

We're also off to an exciting start this spring! Baseball is expected to win their third consecutive Patriot League championship, something that no Patriot League team has ever accomplished, and how about women's basketball, who won their third Patriot League championship and a bid to the NCAA championship? Shortly after the high of going to the NCAA tournament, West Point lost Coach Dixon to an untimely death. Please keep the Dixon

family, the team, the West Point community in your prayers. Coach Dixon was a great leader and role model.

Winning on the athletic field is great, but the real payoff comes when our athletes transfer lessons learned in the arena to leading Soldiers. Lessons in courage, perseverance and duty.

In my view, it's the character development and the values education that sets West Point apart from other commissioning sources. From R-Day, when new cadets first learn the Cadet Honor Code, to Graduation Day, when they take the oath of office, cadets are immersed in an environment where the harder right always takes precedence over the easier wrong. The cadet honor system is alive and well, and you would be proud of the integrity, selflessness and courage our cadets show on a daily basis.

To illustrate the impact of the West Point environment - I want to tell you a story now about a former cadet, one who did not make it through our system, but one whom West Point nonetheless touched deeply.

Released for academics, this former Plebe showed his high school and his West Point transcripts to the Dean of Admissions of another college, where he was seeking to transfer. The Dean did not accept him at their college and told the former cadet that he would have a better chance of getting in to a good college if he did not show his recent grades from West Point. The young man replied, "If I learned anything from my time at the Academy, I learned about integrity and honor. I will show my grades from West Point – good or bad – because it's the right thing to do." A day later, the Dean called to apologize for his comment and invite the former cadet to transfer into his college.

Tonight I've tried to share with you the state of our programs at West Point – and more importantly to tell you about your Corps and our graduates.

They are as honorable, loyal, and capable as any class that ever marched across the Plain.

Thank you for establishing the great legacy of the Long Gray Line and thank you for your continued support of West Point. Our Academy is continually improving its programs and facilities, and this is only possible through the generous support of alumni like you.

I'm proud to be... and it's a true privilege to be... your Com.

Beat Navy!